The flip side of flipped language teaching

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Abstract. The past decade has seen a growing interest in "flipped teaching", an inversion of traditional teaching methods, whereby instruction formerly taking place in the classroom is made accessible online and lesson time is spent on interaction. Until very recently, flipped learning was largely limited to the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields and/or the teaching of blended courses, but some foreign language professionals have also now begun to take notice. At first glance, the approach may appear promising, as it would normalize computers in general instruction and allow teachers to serve more as facilitators and managers rather than purveyors of knowledge. However, reports of its efficacy have so far been mostly anecdotal. Moreover, most flipped teaching as currently practiced assumes top-down presentation that ignores fundamental differences in the nature and purpose of instructional input when content learning is the main, if not sole, objective and language acquisition occurs only incidentally, if at all. As such, without thoughtful adaptation, it is inconsistent with and unsuited for contemporary foreign language pedagogy. This paper discusses potential advantages and disadvantages to consider in the decision of whether to flip the foreign language classroom.

Keywords: flipped learning, inverted classroom, integrated CALL, P-P-P model, SAMR model.

1. Introduction

In 2007, two American high school chemistry teachers began posting video-recorded slide show presentations of their class lectures online with the main intention of assisting students who were absent from their normal lessons (Bergman & Sams, 2012). However, online student access to the course content quickly became so popular that these teachers eventually adopted an entirely different approach to their

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pedagogy, now commonly referred to as "flipped teaching", "flipped learning", or the "flipped classroom", an inversion of traditional instructional methods, whereby formerly in-class activities are now completed at home and "homework" activities are done in class. This approach has since spread worldwide, with educators from primary to tertiary level using online videos and podcasts for direct instruction outside of class so as to reserve lesson time for collaborative work and concept mastery exercises.

Although the popularizers of the flipped teaching movement and most of its early adopters taught in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, some educators and administrators in foreign languages have also now joined the ranks of its advocates. On the surface, flipped teaching appears to announce the dawn of the long-awaited integrated phase of CALL (Bax, 2003), wherein computers will eventually be used as a normal part of everyday instruction and teacher roles will shift to ones of facilitators and managers. Moreover, flipped teaching is often touted for its socio-constructivist approach and its emphasis on active learning as well as its potentially positive effects on learner motivation.

It must be pointed out, however, that most of the evidence to date on the efficacy of flipped teaching has been largely anecdotal. More importantly, key differences between the processes of internalizing subject knowledge and those of acquiring a second language have resulted in correspondingly characteristic pedagogical practices that call for special consideration. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of flipping foreign language classrooms and to propose a sensible approach to dealing with them.

2. Background

Since the launch of the OpenCourseWare (OCW) initiative by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2001, numerous other organizations, such as the Khan Academy, Udacity, and Coursera, have also now established their presence in the world of free, high-quality online learning resources, leading students at brick-and-mortar institutions and their administrators alike to question the value of a traditional university education, the cost of which has only continued to rise in recent years (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). One major response has been a push for more learner-centered instructional approaches to actively engage students in the learning process. These include peer-assisted, problem-based, experiential, collaborative, and cooperative learning, among others. Until recently, however, already overfull curriculums have made the successful implementation of such approaches difficult if not impossible. For this reason, flipped teaching, which frees

up valuable lesson time by reassigning class lectures as homework, has garnered increasing attention over the past few years.

By making lectures available in video format online, flipped teaching allows learners to access them whenever and wherever they like and to progress through them at their own pace. Moreover, by permitting teachers to spend their time interacting with individuals and small groups rather than presenting information top-down to the entire class as a whole, flipped classrooms provide important opportunities for better diagnostics and greater differentiation of instruction. Student opinion surveys have shown generally positive attitudes toward video lectures as well as relatively high viewing rates as compared to the completion of traditional assigned readings (Bishop & Verleger, 2013), and while very few empirical studies have been done to assess the impact of flipped teaching on student learning, the early findings suggest improved scores on homework assignments, projects, and written tests, at least in science and mathematics (see Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Fulton, 2012). As such, it should come as no surprise that this novel approach has now caught the attention of educators in other disciplines, including those in foreign languages.

3. Discussion

Schmitt, Herder, and Bhalla (1997) posit that the success of a technological innovation really depends on its ability to abstract and reconstruct the essence of its predecessor, not simply to reproduce its functions. By this standard, however, with respect to language teaching, the flipped classroom fails on both counts. Even following a traditional Presentation-Practice-Production (P-P-P) teaching model, the first two phases should still consist of more than mere transmission, including some degree of interaction to promote intake of the input. According to Puentedura's (2013) bottom-up hierarchy of technological implementations, comprising Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition (SAMR), simple video recordings of class lectures are arguably at the very lowest level. Although the case could be made that video lectures are an augmented form of their live counterparts with the added option to pause and replay them, this additional functionality comes at the expense of another, namely a responsive instructor who can process immediate feedback from learners when a point is unclear, make on-the-spot adjustments, and modify his or her teaching approach before continuing.

Herreid and Schiller (2013) point out that teacher-produced videos in the fields where they now exist are not only often sub-par but also quite time consuming to make. While Tucker (2012) cites a public grade school teacher in the US who

considers flipped teaching an opportunity to raise the level of teaching practice and the status of the profession as a whole, that same teacher also admits the formidable challenge of boiling down instruction to its most essential elements, for the recommended video length is as little as four to six minutes, far shorter than the average lecture. One can only imagine the greater time commitment and technological expertise required to create the type of professional quality interactive videos and exercises necessary for effective language instruction. It is possible that the burden of creating an optimal flipped classroom may prove too great for any single instructor, in which case qualified language professionals could even conceivably find themselves in the role of dedicated educational technologists relegated throughout the day to multimedia studios while less expensive teaching assistants take their place as facilitators in the classroom.

Fulton (2012) suggests that in some contexts, teams of teachers might work together to produce a library of videos to share, but even these would need to be frequently re-made to reflect changes in social language use. To avoid this issue altogether, Correa (2015) proposes that teachers might use pre-made videos, just as they routinely use textbooks. However, assigning video lectures for homework, returning to an earlier point, assumes foreknowledge of student needs and interests, for a recorded presenter, unlike a live one, cannot responsively alter his or her message. Moreover, while some knowledge and skills may be prerequisites for others in some fields, there does not appear to be any universal order of language feature acquisition, and in today's highly mobile world, where learners no longer necessarily arrive to the classroom with negligible differences in language background and experience, the issue of sequencing a structure-based syllabus is only so much more complicated.

Although their main concern is authentic intercultural communication, for which they advocate online telecollaboration, the orchestration of which has logistical issues of its own, Kohn and Hoffstaedter (2015) take a broader, and perhaps more suitable view of flipped language pedagogy as "delegating to a virtual learning environment all those tasks and activities that a traditional classroom may not support sufficiently" (p. 2). For instance, in a class of L2 learners all sharing the same L1 and largely interacting in their L2 for the mere sake of practice rather than for real communication and where the interlocutor feedback is, thus, of dubious value, the situation could be remedied by means of online drills. While these types of exercises, similar to valid video lectures, would require both pedagogical knowledge and technical skills to create, they at least do not pretend to substitute for the active learning most seasoned language teachers already try to engender in their face-to-face time with their students and, thus, might more easily be borrowed if necessary.

4. Conclusion

Flipped teaching, if it is to be adopted at all in foreign language classrooms, needs to be considered with great care. First and foremost, we must understand that it is more a matter of pedagogy than of technology and that its interpretation and application in other fields may not be entirely suitable to our own. Thus, in order to decide what to think of it, we must first get at the root of what we are trying to accomplish by our teaching. In other words, we need to clearly identify the factors we believe most effectively promote second language acquisition and determine whether they are better cultivated online or face to face. That said, we should also remain practical, for the greater the time we spend on resource development, not only the more fruitful the potential results will be, but also the more likely we are to find ourselves removed from the classroom altogether. In short, we need to be wise about flipped teaching and approach it with due caution.

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